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Jerry L. Williams

Stephen F. Austin State University, jwilliams@sfasu.edu

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Fighting the Keystone-XL Pipeline: Unlikely Partners

During the fall of 2013 Nacogdoches, a small town in southeast Texas, became a battle zone over the construction of the southern section of the Keystone XL Pipeline. Once completed this pipeline is designed to carry tar sands crude from Canada to refineries near Beaumont, Texas. Due to its climate, environmental, and safety consequences the pipeline has become heavily contested over the last two or three years both in Canada and the United States. As a result, activists from a group called Tar Sands Blockade arrived in Nacogdoches in early fall 2012 to begin a series of protest actions. These activists came from all corners of the United States. Over the next few months they constructed tree platforms in the path of bulldozers, chained themselves to heavy equipment, and barricaded themselves in sections of pipe in hope of slowing construction and swaying public opinion. These efforts ended in high profile arrests and media coverage. East Texas had perhaps never seen social protests of this sort, not even during the 1960's struggle for civil rights, a struggle that nearly missed Nacogdoches.

The October edition of *The Nation* included an article about the pipeline actions in Nacogdoches. Wen Stephenson begins by describing the involvement of a local Baptist church in the support of the pipeline blockaders (Stephenson, 2013). Over the second half of 2012 and most of 2013 the members of Austin Heights Baptist Church provided food, shelter, and emotional support to protestors. Many blockaders attended Sunday services. In southeast Texas, known for its evangelical religious conservatism, this collaboration seemed unexpected and unlikely. After all, religion has often been

considered a cause of environmental damage not as playing a part in its remediation (White, 1967).

How was such a relationship between two seemingly different groups possible? In what follows I suggest that this unlikely partnership came about because both parties held a particularly non idealistic / non-gnostic set of ideological commitments. That is, blockaders embraced direct action against the pipeline instead of relying only upon a discourse of ideas to advance their cause. Similarly, church members embraced a non-gnostic approach to Christianity that has led them to nearly a half century of social activism and community organization. Gnosticism refers to a version of Christian theology that advances an overly spiritualized form of faith that ignores and discounts involvement with the physical world (Cooper, 2006; Kaufmann, 2013). Cooper (2006) put it this way “and yet there were some essential convictions that are taken to reflect the essence of Gnosticism. The foremost is a simple dualism between spirit and matter: spirit was good, matter was evil. This distinction permeated the Gnostic system” (p. 17).

This coincidence of orientations between two quite different groups is worthy of deeper consideration. In particular, it requires us to place the direct action of the blockaders and the anti-gnosticism of the church in contrast to the prevailing secular gnosticism (idealism) of American culture and the dominant religious gnosticism that characterizes American Christianity. Here it is argued that modern idealism and gnosticism have a common link in the tradition of Christian skepticism dating to the very earliest years of the Church (Tibaldeo, 2012). Idealism in its present form arose from its connection to Christian skepticism as articulated by Descartes (1999). Idealism is, in effect, a secular gnosticism with obvious human exemptionalist implications. That is,

secular gnosticism predisposes Western societies to disregard the environment and to see human societies as exempt from natural limits (Dunlap & Catton, 1982). Similarly, American Christianity itself has, over this period, become increasingly gnostic, favoring an emphasis on salvation through belief and spiritual insight over actual involvement in the real world of human affairs (Tibaldeo, 2012). Kaufmann (2013) put it this way, “gnosticism makes another related and fundamental mistake. It proposes that nature is the problem and must be completely overcome” (p. 34). Before exploring this idea further, let us in more detail examine the roots of gnosticism (both religious and secular).

Human Being - Dualism

Religious and secular gnosticism are predicated upon an important experiential fact - the self is always experienced as a dualism, as having two distinct aspects - the thing perceived and the thing that is doing the perceiving. Mead (1964) put it this way,

Recognizing that the self cannot appear in consciousness as an ‘I’, that it is always an object, i.e., a ‘me’, I wish to suggest an answer to the question. What is involved in the self being an object? The first answer may be that an object involves a subject. Stated in other words, that a ‘me’ is inconceivable without an ‘I’. (p. 142)

Recognizing the dual nature of self does not commit us to a metaphysical or spiritual position as long as we restrict our analysis to the everyday experience of self (James, 1890). Rather, this approach helps us to see that on the level of everyday life, being both perceiver and the thing perceived allows us to apprehend the self as both material (our bodies) and as something less tangible and ephemeral (thought), something

beyond our immediate understanding. Self, then, appears to us as both material (our bodies) and immaterial (thought about the material). Human beings have projected this dualism upon the world itself (Williams, 2007). Those aspects of nature that either through direct manipulation or through projection can be manipulated are thought of as material, those that exist beyond our reach and understanding are thought to be spiritual or ideal. John Dewey (1920) commented about the consequences of this division when he stated,

It operated on the basis of a hard and fast division of the interests, concerns, and purposes of human activity into two “realms,” or, by a curious use of language, into two “spheres” - not hemispheres. One was taken to the “high” and hence to possess supreme jurisdiction over the other as inherently “low.” That which is high was given the name “spiritual,” ideal, and was identified with the moral. The other was the “physical” as determined by the procedures of the new science of nature.

(p. xxxi)

While it is not possible to explore all of the subtleties of this argument here, it is nevertheless important to point out that gnosticism in both its religious and secular forms is logically only possible because the world appears to those living their everyday lives as both material and ideal. For much of human history this meant a dualism between spirit and the physical world. After Descartes it increasingly meant a dualism between ideas and the physical world.

Religious Gnosticism

Religious or Christian Gnosticism has a long history in the Christian faith dating nearly to its inception. At stake was a conflict over the essence of Christian experience. Gnostic movements held that Christianity meant denying the physicality of the world or at least bracketing it from consideration in favor of meditation and divine revelation (Tibaldeo, 2012). In its most extreme form Gnostics denied that Christ was a physical, corporeal man but rather pure spirit and that the physical world is a corruption that stands in the way of spiritual insight. These positions combined with other doctrinal stands led the Church to label these various gnostic movements as heresies beginning as early as the third century (Webb, 2005). In contrast to these gnostic movements the Church held that the Christian experience certainly had spiritual elements but that in essence Christianity meant a concrete physical religious practice of sacrament, liturgy, and living as part of a religious community.

Today religious gnosticism exists more as a tendency in Christian expression than as a sect or movement (Johnson, 2004) . It is fair to say that modern American Christian churches can be quite easily placed on a gnosticism continuum - gnostic to non-gnostic. Those on the gnostic end of the spectrum are those that emphasize personal revelation, faith, and salvation as ends in themselves seeing little or no need for addressing the needs of the poor or other social and environmental problems. On the non-gnostic end of the spectrum are those churches and believers that actively engage in real world ministries, faith communities, and social justice activities. For example, we could say that the civil rights movement of the 1960s in the United States was led by non-gnostic leaning religious leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Ironically, these leaders operated in in the context of a very gnostic, world rejecting

Southern religion that in its way both directly and indirectly perpetuated racism and discrimination in the American South. This requires more explanation.

Berger (1963) suggested that Bible Belt religion operated as a latent ideology in the American South. Because of its gnostic tendencies that focused upon individual belief and the definition of "sin" as a private matter (sex, gambling, etc.), the racist social structure of the South remained fully entrenched beyond the critical focus of its Christian adherents. Ironically, change came to the American South in part because the non-gnostic versions of Christian faith proffered by Dr. King and others challenged southern religion on its own terms, terms recast by civil rights activists to resonate with a Bible belt audience. As we will soon see, religious gnosticism as practiced by evangelical Christianity also provides a challenge to the remediation of environmental problems. If Christianity is purely a matter of gnosis, conversion, belief, and salvation - strictly spiritual concerns, then there is little room for environmental concerns. Indeed research consistently shows that Evangelical Christians show less environmental concern than the general U.S. population, but also less than other versions of Christianity (Johnson, 2004).

The collaboration of the Tar Sands Blockade and Austin Heights Baptist Church in Nacogdoches, Texas is understandable when it is considered that church members for nearly fifty years have approached their faith in a substantially non-gnostic fashion. The church came into being in the 1960s as local people struggled to make sense of the civil rights movement and to rethink the role religion should play in a new South. In 1969 a small group of members of the local First Baptist Church broke away when the church deacons voted not to allow African American members. These breakaway

members also expressed dissatisfaction with the overly emotional, spiritualized style of worship there, a gnostic leaning style still common in the Bible belt (McDonald, 2009). In the years that followed these breakaway members formed Austin Heights Baptist Church and began a cooperative relationship with Zion Hill Baptist Church, one of the oldest African American Baptist churches in the state of Texas. This relationship continues to this day. Additionally, as pointed out by *The Nation* (Stephenson, 2013), Kyle Childress, the current pastor is the only white member of the local African American Ministerial Alliance. Since its inception Austin Heights has been directly involved in many social justice causes. The most recent of which is support for Tar Sands Blockaders. A partial list of their activities includes organizing the first sheltered workshop for people with developmental disabilities in Nacogdoches County, founding the only HIV clinic in East Texas, starting a local Habitat for Humanity operation and Restore location, and a variety of environmental awareness actions and educational programs (McDonald, 2009).

In respect to environmental action in East Texas, Austin Heights has been a leader. For example, the church funded and organized a screening of the movie *Inconvenient Truth* at Stephen F. Austin State University. It was the only showing of the movie between Houston and Dallas. More recently the church held the only public hearing in all of south Texas for the sunset review of the Texas Department of Environmental Quality, thus allowing citizens from as far away as San Antonio to read statements into the legislative the record. With this background, it is no wonder that Tar Sand Blockaders found support from the church. The church's non-gnostic

commitments were an obvious match for the blockaders who themselves eschewed the secular gnosticism common in more idealistic environmental discussions.

In the following section I address the roots of secular gnosticism and its rejection by Tar Sands Blockaders. As we will see secular gnosticism is directly related to religious gnosticism by way of an ancient Christian meditation that sought to gain religious insight by shutting out or denying the physical world. This technique was adopted and secularized by and Rene Descartes, the thinker most often associated with modern idealism.

Secular Gnosticism

In the foregoing I have made an attempt to describe dualism and the idealism which results as secular gnosticism. I do so in more than just a metaphorical fashion. This is the case because Cartesian idealism has roots in gnostic religious thought. It is appropriate to cite Descartes' *cogitio* ("I think therefore I am") as one of the most important foundations of modern dualism (Dennett, 1991). In this famous meditation, Descartes arrives at ultimate certainty by first doubting or bracketing the existence of the external world. For Descartes, what remained is the interior world of thought, a phenomenon that Descartes believed to be an unquestionable fact. By privileging thought as the *axis mundi* of reality, Descartes in effect took sides in the argument between logical / rational tradition of antiquity and the growing empiricism of the scientific revolution. What is important for our purposes is that since Descartes time dualism has implicitly involved a denial or lack of consideration of the physical world in favor of thought about the world.

Cartesian idealism seems similar to religious gnosticism because it shares a common foundation. In correspondence between Alfred Schutz and Kurt Voeglin Voeglin discussed the religious foundation of Cartesian thinking (Schutz & Schutz, 2011). He wrote,

In principle, Descartes' meditation is a meditation in the traditional Christian manner. Indeed, it can be more precisely classified as a meditation of the Augustinian type, which, from the time of Augustine, has been performed hundreds of times in the history of the Christian spirit.

(p. 39)

He went on to point out that this type of mediation was common in Christian thought from a very early time. The unknown 14th century author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* put it this way, "It is needful for thee to bury in a cloud of forgetting all creatures that God ever made, that you mayest direct thine intent to God Himself" (p. 39). Properly understood the Cartesian cogito is a secularization of the traditional Christian meditation. What follows from this secularization is a new understanding of mind. Before the Cartesian transformation the dualism of human self-experience was understood as one between body and soul. After Descartes this dualism was recast as one between body and mind, a mind that was similarly ephemeral and metaphysical but located in the pineal gland housed within the human brain (Dennett, 1991). Importantly however, both the traditional Christian meditation and the Cartesian reformulation have a world-rejecting propensity favoring spiritual insight and the centrality of ideas respectively. Both are therefore gnostic in their tendency to discount the physical world.

The Tar Sands Blockade action in Nacogdoches representative of what I believe is a secular, less gnostic approach to bringing about social and environmental change. This is in contrast to idealism expressed as rational humanism. Rational humanism refers to the dominant mode of thinking about human beings in the modern western world (Williams, 2003). It is characterized by the understanding that humans are uniquely endowed with reason and therefore have the ability to improve the human condition (Williams, 2003). In the years following Descartes cogito that brought us the exceptional human mind, idealism has become a taken for granted feature of what it means to be human. As a result, efforts to bring about change in modern societies often revolve around a discourse of competing ideas. The current political scene in the United States is an example of this type of debate. Such battles are often informed on both sides by the "differential knowledge thesis" (Williams, 2003). That is, "informed" elites who have "knowledge" about a particular social problem believe that social change will occur when the public is educated about the "true" nature of whatever social problem is at hand. Ironically, this way of thinking amounts to a secular conversion similar to religious conversion. For both the secular and the religious what is sought is a realignment of public and personal thinking to "the way things really are."

American environmentalism often adopts the differential knowledge thesis as an implicit rationale. Recent environmental documentary movies like *Chasing Ice*, *Food Inc.*, and *King Corn*, are examples of this type of effort. It is likely that such movies, when shown to the public, will only attract those already predisposed to the message. Those apathetic or antagonistic to the message will simply stay home. Similarly, ardent "sinners" without a religious background do not frequently attend tent meeting revivals.

Both airing documentary movies and hosting tent meeting revivals really only amount to "preaching to the choir." The similarity of both types of conversion speaks to the close alignment idealism and secular gnosticism have with traditional Christian thought. This should not be surprising. As we have seen, idealism results from a dualist conception of mind and a profound disinterest in the material world.¹

It is fair to say that tar Sands Blockaders intentionally adopted a different type of environmentalism than one that pursues the differential knowledge thesis. They adopted an environmentalism of direct action and grassroots organization, that is, a non-gnostic approach to environmental action. Grassroots environmentalism has been an important part of the environmental sociology literature. Common to this approach is a "ground up," democratic, and participatory approach to environmental action. The non-gnostic approach taken by the blockaders is evident from their statement of purpose. It states "the Tar Sands Blockade is an open invitation for people across North America to join a peaceful direct action campaign to stop the Keystone XL pipeline" (Tar Sands Blockade, 2013). They go on to say "Tar Sands Blockade is coordinating grassroots actions across Texas." Here we see a commitment to direct action, grass roots environmentalism and concern for a real world environmental problem. For sure, educational efforts were also part of their agenda in Nacogdoches, but without doubt the primary focus of Tar Sands Blockade was upon building community support and physically disrupting the construction of the pipeline so that

¹ It is important to point out that the dominant conception of mind in everyday life is secular is not the same as saying it is naturalistic. Naturalistic conceptions of mind that give a biological explanation for mind have been around for many years (James, Mead). Modern authors such as Dennett and Pinker have also advanced, biologically sophisticated naturalistic explanations. None of these explanations have gained traction in everyday life even among even secular thinkers.

pending legal action could move forward. With such ideological commitments it is no wonder blockaders came to be allied with Austin Heights Baptist Church, a church who likewise had long ago adopted a non-gnostic approach to their faith.

A Reciprocal Relationship

Two accounts best describe the relationship between Tar Sands Blockade and Austin Heights Baptist Church. The first occurred on November 19, 2012 in a Blockade action at Lake Nacogdoches near a Keystone-XL pipeline construction site. Blockaders conducted an action that involved construction of precarious tree stands tied to parked heavy equipment and other nonviolent acts of social disobedience. No church members directly participated in the action, but news coverage included film and photographs of church members offering food and water. Others filmed the action in order to assure humane treatment of the blockaders. In the days before and after the action, church members provided hot showers, food, and moral support. Some members pooled money to buy gift cards at a local coffee shop, and others provided transportation from jail for those who had been arrested. On Sundays, as pointed out by *The Nation*,¹ many Blockaders attended church and were fed lunch following the service. In short, Austin Heights treated Blockaders as human beings engaged in an important struggle that coincided with their non-gnostic conception of faith. It goes without saying that blockaders, most of whom beforehand had seen religious people as part of the environmental problem, saw a version of Christian faith unfamiliar to them.

The second account that describes the relationship between the blockaders and the church occurred December 12, 2012. Blockaders and church members met together to discuss the role of the church and its "earth care ministry" in the

environmental movement. The discussion focused upon what is the proper focus of environmental concern (recycling, energy consumption or large scale transformation) and the limits of civil disobedience. Blockaders were placed in small groups with church members to discuss these issues in detail. Both groups were charged to challenge each other's assumptions and preconceptions. At the end of the meeting the small groups reported to their results and a summary discussion commenced. This second incident is important because it demonstrates these two groups of quite different individuals were able to forge a relationship based upon a shared concern for the environment and a non-gnostic view of the world.

Conclusion

The relationship between Austin Heights Baptist Church and Tar Sands Blockade is both unexpected and rare. It occurred only because both groups held a relatively non-gnostic view of the world. Born in the Civil Rights movements, Austin Heights had long been accustomed to social justice struggles. Tar Sands Blockade, on the other hand, adopted a policy of nonviolent direct action that coincided with the concerns and goals of the church. Most importantly, these groups were able to forge a language that allowed them to communicate and to pursue a common goal. What can be learned from this experience?

1) It is often assumed that the lack of concern that American Christians have for the environmental cause is an intrinsic feature of the faith itself. This relationship suggests that this is not the case. More likely, this lack of environmental concern is a product of an increasingly gnostic form of religious expression that limits religious experience to an internal, spiritual type of gnostic conversion. Gnostic religion has little

(no) room for concern about the material world.

2) American Christians are not alone in their gnosticism. Sociologists traditionally have had little regard for anything other than "social facts." The material world has, then, not been a major concern. Secular gnosticism is also a central feature of modern idealism, the prevailing *Weltanschauung* of the Western world. American culture is replete with examples of ideological battles being fought over ideas with very little regard for real world evidence or circumstances. In respect to social change and solving the problems we face, we Americans are indeed secular gnostics.

3) The relationship between Austin Heights and Tar Sand Blockade was only possible because both groups found a way to communicate and to respect each other's deeply held beliefs. This communication came about because of an openness enabled by a shared commitment to the environment and to direct action and community involvement.

4) Finally, this relationship points to what I believe is substantial misunderstanding. It is often assumed by both the religious community and scientifically informed environmentalists that their interests are incommensurable - that their differences exist on the level of contradictory ideas. In fact, as pointed out earlier, many environmentalists see religion as a substantial part of the cause of environmental damage.

This essay suggests that these two groups have more in common than is now recognized. That is, American Christianity has increasingly becoming gnostic thus focusing upon spiritual insight and salvation while many environmentalists have themselves embraced the secular gnosticism of rational humanism and the differential

knowledge thesis. The relationship between Tar Sands Blockade and Austin Heights Baptist Church suggest that less gnostic forms of environmentalism (both religious and secular) are possible.

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